



Colin Hastings (left) and Steve Creswell in the cockpit

AS fluffy white clouds hung in the air above and golden fields rolled by 1,200ft below I felt pleasantly at peace with the world.

Which is why pilot Colin Hastings' question came as a heart-stopping bolt out of the blue.

"So do you fancy flying the plane for a bit?"

Time came to a sudden standstill: birds stopped mid-flight; the whirr of the propeller was replaced with deadly silence; and I imagine jukeboxes suddenly cut out in pubs across the nation...

Rewind half an hour and I had just pulled into the dusty car park at Panshanger Aerodrome in WGC.

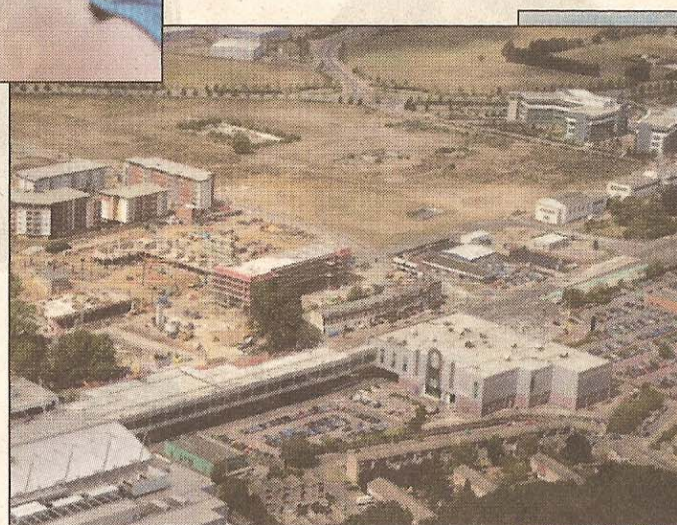
It was like stepping back in time.

Pilots in uniform lounged in front of a big, rusty hangar drinking tea. Small propeller planes littered the forecourt in front of the grass runways. I even spotted a World War Two Spitfire coming in to land.

All it needed was a dog frolicking in the long grass and the wartime movie scene would have been complete.

I was there to help Colin and his pilot chums promote a special aviation day for youngsters, due to take place the following weekend.

It turns out that since 9/11 there has been a fairly substantial fall in people



Seen from the air... plenty of space still to develop on the BAe site (above) and fields of gold nearby (right)

wanting to get into the industry – mostly due to stricter regulations and increased costs of flying.

Basically Colin was hoping to encourage more youngsters to get into aviation – on any level – by zooming them around the skies in light aircraft.

"The aim of this is to get people into flying and to show them the excitement you get from it," he said as we carried out routine checks on his four-seater Piper Arrow plane.

"Flying in a light aircraft is not the same as flying in an airliner. You see more, you feel more."

Possibly spotting a flicker of fear on my face, he added: "Aeroplanes are very safe. They are designed so that if you let them go they will land – with a bump – but they will land. In choppy weather it's sometimes better to let go of the controls and let the plane sort itself out."

Thankfully I didn't have much time to contemplate these remarks as I was told that, before we could climb in, I had to **PULL** the plane into position.

Images of muscle-bound Schwarzenegger

types dragging Boeing 747s along with their teeth flooded into my head.

It was fortunate then that the single propeller plane was surprisingly light. And I didn't have to use my teeth...

Once it was clear of any obstacles, we jumped in, taxied out onto the runway and before I knew it we were hurtling through Welwyn Hatfield airspace. Colin was clearly having the time of his life.

"Who wouldn't want to fly?" he yelled over at me. "Isn't this just fun?"

"We have to fly at 1,200ft because we have to stay below Stansted airspace. But at this height we have to look out for things like TV masts."

Strangely I wasn't too bothered by the thought of ploughing into a huge metal pylon – it seemed as though Colin had everything under control.

Then he asked *THAT* question.

Once time had reverted to its normal flow I actually decided it was too big an opportunity to miss.

The lure of the

Reporter Steve Creswell was happy to accept an invitation from an aviation enthusiast with a mission to get people airborne. When he was asked to take over the controls, he hesitated... but only for a moment. Louisa Emery came along too, to take on-board photos and aerial views



empty sky

Short-haul...
Steve works for
his place on
the plane



To tell the truth I have always dreamt of soaring through the sky like Superman – a fantasy, I'm embarrassed to say, that still hasn't left me at the age of 29 – and flying a small plane is the next best thing.

So I took a deep breath and grabbed the yolk – as the control stick is known.

Flying was an undeniably terrifying experience, made worse by extremely sensitive controls and the constant buffering from hot air currents.

But after a few minutes I was getting the hang of it and by the time I had to bank the plane over to the left to return to the airfield I was beginning to enjoy myself.

WHT photographer Louisa, however, had turned an unhealthy shade of white and only perked up once Colin took the controls back off me. Strange.

Back on the ground I was buzzing, a huge grin plastered to my face that would not leave until the following

morning when I had to go to work.

Colin and I grabbed a cup of tea and joined a few of the other pilots soaking up the sun on the café terrace.

I asked him how he got into flying. "I've always wanted to fly," he said.

"Basically I've always been a very large person. I used to be 25 stone! A few years ago I decided to lose weight, which I did, and my present to myself was to learn to fly.

"I fly any chance I can get. It's a hobby, like owning a boat or a classic car. We're all geeks really! If I'm really honest I just like saying 'I'm a pilot'!"

The dad-of-two, who owns his own business, reckons anyone can learn to fly as long as they're willing to save up to pay for the lessons – which cost £112 each.

And his verdict on my flying skills?

"You were great!" said Colin. Superman, eat your heart out.



Youngsters given a grounding in aviation

MORE than 50 youngsters enjoyed an action packed aviation day – despite the weather's best efforts to scupper their fun.

Air Cadets as well as members of scout and guide groups across Times Territory had been expecting to take to the skies in small propeller planes.

But due to strong winds and rain they had to stay in the main hangar at Panshanger Aerodrome, WGC, last Saturday.

Organiser and pilot Colin Hastings told the WHT: "We couldn't fly but we managed to do everything else. They ended up having a whale of a time.

"They all got to sit in a plane with a pilot who explained all the

instruments to them they listened to air traffic control at Luton.

"It was so windy we couldn't take off; the aircraft would have been blown across the runway. But we did taxi a few of the kids around."

The idea of the day was to encourage more youngsters to get into the aviation industry.

They all enjoyed a barbecue as well as map reading games and a tour of the airfield.

Colin added: "It's a shame the weather broke but we'll definitely do it again next year."

● For more information about learning to fly call the aerodrome on 01707 391791.